

Following the Fire

[Exodus 3:1-15](#)

[Psalms 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c](#)

[Romans 12:9-21](#)

[Matthew 16:21-28](#)

I was ordained on the feast day of Saint Brigid, which means fire got woven into my priesthood from the beginning. Brigid is almost always pictured holding a flame, because she understood fire as the light of Christ. Long before she was a saint, the hill at Kildare held a fire tended by pagan priestesses, kept constantly as part of the ancient Celtic prayer for protection and a bountiful harvest. When Brigid founded her monastery on that same hill, she kept the flame going, folding an older fire into a new story. I have loved fire ever since I was a child - candles, campfires, the coziness of a fireplace on cold nights. Fire has always felt like a strange, appropriate metaphor for God: something you can be near but not touch; something that changes whatever it touches.

That is where Moses finds God this morning; in a bush that burns and is not consumed. Not because fire was God's costume for the day, but because fire explains God in a way no other image quite manages; presence without consumption, closeness without control. It is that same fire that leads a fleeing people out of Egypt, at same fire that falls on a room full of confused disciples at Pentecost and does not burn them up. God keeps showing up in fire because fire tells the truth about God: near, real, untamable, alive.

Moses wants a name. Standing barefoot on holy ground, in the middle of the strangest job interview in scripture, he asks God's name so he will have something to say when Pharaoh asks who sent him. And God gives him almost nothing. I AM WHO I AM. I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE. It is less a name than a form of the verb to be, and it is designed to resist being pinned down. It will not be confined; not to a place, not to a formula, not even to a definition you could look up and consider settled. What it offers instead is a promise: I am here. I will be here. Wherever you travel, whatever you encounter, I will be present.

We do not get God's resume in this text. We get an itinerary. God sees their suffering. God hears their cries. God remembers the covenant. God comes down, calls Moses, confronts Pharaoh, liberates a people, travels with them through the wilderness, and eventually moves into a tent among them. That is how we learn who God is; not by memorizing the name, but by watching what God does. And here is the uncomfortable part: that itinerary was never meant to end with God. It was always the pattern God expected of Israel, and expects of us, to continue. See the suffering. Hear the cries. Remember the covenant. Move closer. Be present.

Which is exactly the test Peter fails a few thousand years later. Jesus asks the disciples who they say he is, and Peter gets it right. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." He says the name correctly. And then, in the very same conversation, he completely misunderstands what it means, rebuking Jesus for talking about the cross, trying to talk God out of God's own plan. Peter knew the name. He did not yet know the person. That is still our problem. We can have precise, orthodox, Sunday-school-correct language for who God is and still have almost no idea what God is actually doing, because knowing the name was never the finish line. We have to follow and participate to find out who it is we are actually following.

Which brings us to how the Psalm tells us to do this. This is not a contemplative psalm. It is kinetic. Give thanks, call, make known, sing, tell, glory, seek, seek continually, remember. Every verb is a full-body verb. Notice what the Psalm does not tell us to do: it never tells us to explain God. It never asks us to construct a tidy theology and defend it. It tells us to remember and tell the stories...what God has actually done, out loud, together, again and again, so a whole people keeps knowing who this God is.

That word "remember" is bigger than it appears. In Hebrew it is *zakar*, and *zakar* is never just a mental exercise. It is not merely recalling a fact, the way you would recall a phone number. It is active. To remember, biblically, is to do something because of what you

remember... to let the memory reshape our next steps. Israel does not remember the Exodus by having a nice thought about it once a year. They remember it by keeping Passover, telling the children stories, then orienting their lives around a God who acts.

Which is what Paul is asking the Romans to do when he tells them how to be living sacrifices. He does not hand them a doctrine to defend. He hands them a list of verbs. Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil, hold fast to good. Outdo one another in showing honor. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you. Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony. Never repay evil for evil. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

That last line is this whole sermon in miniature. Paul knows exactly how tempting it is to fight evil by becoming a little evil ourselves... a little harder, a little more ruthless, matching cruelty with cruelty because it feels like it's the only language your enemy understands. Paul says no. You overcome evil **BY** good, and the good he lists is entirely, deliberately communal. Not one of those verbs works alone. You cannot practice hospitality alone, or weep with someone alone, or outdo one another in honor alone. This is a whole new way of being human together, and it is the only way Paul can imagine actually defeating evil instead of feeding it.

Which lands us back at Peter, and at the cross, and at what it costs to follow this fire instead of just naming it. Jesus tells the disciples plainly, for the first time, that he is headed toward suffering and death in Jerusalem. Peter cannot stand it, and Jesus turns to him and says the hardest line in the whole gospel: get behind me, Satan. Not because Peter is evil, but because Peter is doing exactly what we all do when we love someone... we try to protect them.

Following Jesus toward the cross does not mean God enjoys suffering, or that suffering is somehow good in itself. It means we trust that even suffering is a place through which God

is willing to act, the way God was willing to act through Moses' exile, through Israel's slavery, through a wilderness Israel never wanted. The cross is not the end of the story. It is the pathway into the life of God.

Peter is going to get the keys to the kingdom. Jesus already promised him that. But he has to learn, painfully and slowly, the way most of us do, that kingdom authority was never meant to be the power to protect what we love at all costs. It is the authority to discern where God is actually leading, even when that direction runs straight through loss.

Because here is the last thing these texts have for us this morning: you cannot find your life by protecting it. As long as we are clenched, gripping tight to what we already have and already know, refusing to lose anything, we cannot open our hands wide enough to receive the new life God keeps trying to hand us.

Some of us are living lives right now that we never expected, and I do not just mean the losses, though I mean those too. I mean the plain fact that none of us are living the life we pictured, for better and for worse. Moses certainly was not... tending sheep in Midian, a fugitive foreigner with a stutter. Peter certainly was not... expecting a conquering king and getting a crucified one instead. Following the fire has never meant getting the story we planned. It means trusting the God who says, wherever you go, I will be there. It means staying close enough to that fire to watch what God does next.

So come to this table believing in the power of resurrection. The way Moses came to that bush...shoes off, hands open, done pretending we can stand back from the flame and still call it faith. Come remembering, the way the Psalmist tells us to, not just believing something about God but doing something with the stories we remember. And when we leave here, May We Be A People who look for God's flame... in the hungry stranger, in the enemy we're tempted to repay evil for evil, in whatever cross we've have been trying to talk

God out of. May we follow that flame knowing it will cost us something. Knowing it will also be the way into life.